

Twelfth Street YMCA Building
(Anthony Bowen YMCA Building)
1816 Twelfth Street, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-361

HABS
DC
WASH
233 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-361

TWELFTH STREET YMCA BUILDING

(ANTHONY BOWEN YMCA BUILDING)

Location: 1816 Twelfth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. USGS Washington West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.324130.4309220.

Present Owner: YMCA of Metropolitan Washington.

Present Use: YMCA.

Significance: Designed for the black community by a black architect, W. Sidney Pittman, the costly and well-equipped YMCA became a vital community center. Organizations such as the NAACP, Negro Medical Aid Society, and the Federation of Civic Associations used its meeting rooms, while its heated swimming pool was used by several churches for baptism, in addition to temporal pleasure by others. The Y's original fifty-four sleeping rooms provided comfortable accommodations for many, including Howard University students.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction began with "informal ceremonies at 7:20 a.m., Monday Sept. 28, 1908 (Bee Oct. 3, 1908). The building was opened for use on May 19, 1912, after dedication by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson (Bee, May 25, 1912).
2. Architect: William Sidney Pittman. Born in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1875, Pittman studied for five years at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama before entering Drexel Institute in Philadelphia in 1897. In June, 1900, he was awarded a diploma for the course in architecture. Upon graduation from Drexel he returned for five years to teach at Tuskegee, and in 1907 married Portia, the musically talented daughter of Booker T. Washington, the president of Tuskegee.

In the meantime, Pittman came to Washington in 1905 to begin a brief association with John A. Lankford, the first professional black architect in the District of Columbia. By 1906 Pittman had started his own firm.

Pittman's best-known early commission was the large Negro Building at the Jamestown Tricentennial Exposition of 1907.

Because it was constructed with a Congressional appropriation, Pittman was described as the "first Negro whose design had ever been accepted by the Government." Blue Book of the Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition (Norfolk: Colonial Publishing Co., 1909, p. 675).

While practicing in Washington, Pittman lived in Fairmont Heights, Maryland, a largely Negro community. His still-standing house, called "White Tops," may have been designed by him. Very active in Fairmont Heights community affairs, Pittman designed the first public school building there, which still stands. He also designed the Garfield Elementary School at 25th Street and Alabama Avenue, S.E., completed in 1908.

Pittman's failure to get financing to build an eight-story commercial, theatre, and office building, which he designed, on U Street (where the Masonic Temple at 1000 U Street N.W. now stands), probably convinced him to move to Dallas, Texas, in 1912. He already had received several commissions in North Carolina, Alabama, and Texas, and in future years continued to specialize in the design of fraternal buildings, churches, libraries, and college structures. His early commissions included the Negro Carnegie Library in Houston, several buildings at the National Training School in Durham, N.C., and the Odd Fellows Building in Atlanta, Georgia.

Pittman died in 1968.

3. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the property is Square 275, Lot 827. On June 26, 1907, Emily C. Matthews deeded the property to the Young Men's Christian Association which has owned the property ever since (Liber 3059, Folio 405).
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The contractor was J.L. Marshall who was probably white. The Washington Bee of Oct. 3, 1908, reported that Marshall had underbid "A.H. Bollings, the lowest colored contractor, by \$5,000, but turned over to the latter the brick work of the structure." "A.H. Bollings" undoubtedly was S.H. Bolling of Lynchburg, Va., one of the partners who built the True Reformer Building in Washington at 12th and U Streets N.W. It was also reported that "all work will be done by colored men."
5. Original plans and construction: The \$100,000 four-story and basement building was described in 1912 as "the most conspicuous edifice north of F Street . . . Its four granite columns at the entrance stand as four stalwart sentinels extending a cordial welcome to all who approach." (Bee, May 18, 1912).

Facilities included a heated, fifty by twenty foot swimming pool of 42,000 gallon capacity, shower and locker facilities, barber shop, Turkish bath, social rooms, bowling alley, gymnasium, billiard room, reading room, and a "home parlor with open fireplace." (Bee, May 18, 1912) Fifty-four sleeping rooms were located on the top three floors.

- B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure: President Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone on Nov. 26, 1908. (Bee, Dec. 8, 1908) Following that event, fund raising activity continued. In 1911, for instance, President William Howard Taft "was greeted by a large and enthusiastic audience of colored men" who had gathered at the Howard Theatre to raise funds (Bee, May 27, 1911). Of the \$100,000 cost of the building, \$27,000 came from the black community, while John O. Rockefeller and Julian Rosenwald each contributed \$25,000. The balance came from the YMCA Central Association of Washington.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson opened the building on May 19, 1912 (Bee, May 25, 1912).

In 1972 the structure was named for Anthony Bowen. Bowen (1809-1871), a free black man from Prince Georges County, Maryland, in 1853 founded the first YMCA in America for Negroes.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Washington Bee, May 18, 1912, gives detailed coverage of the facilities and of the opening week activities of the Y Building.
2. Ethridge, Harrison M. "The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-President." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, O.C., 1979. Pp. 21-32 discuss Pittman's career in Washington.

Prepared by Or. Harrison M. Ethridge
Associate Professor of History
Catonsville Community College
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1979

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The dignified and well executed front portion of the building displays a free and generous use of classical architectural elements and details. The rear portions of the building are simple in design, but an architect's rendering in a Washington Bee advertisement ca. 1918 indicates that the south side of the two rear portions was to receive the same refined architectural treatment as the front portion.

2. Condition of fabric: The building shows the results of heavy usage, but its structural soundness is proof of original good construction. The third and fourth floors have been unused for many years.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 63' -9" across the front and rear by 167'-4" in depth. Along the north side is a recessed ventilation and light shaft. The building is bordered on the south and west by alleys.

The over-all structure is divided into three adjoining sections. The front portion, which measures 63'-9" x 22'-4", is four stories above a partially exposed basement. The front facade is three bays wide with the windows in the upper three floors grouped in pairs.

Adjoining the front portion is a middle four story and basement section that conforms in floor levels to the front portion. Its south wall, extending 89' along the alley, is flush with the south wall of the front portion, while the north wall is set back to form a light shaft.

At the rear is a third portion with basement and high second (gymnasium) floor. The north and south walls of this rear portion conform to those of the front portion of the structure. The rear portion measures 59' along the alley.

2. Foundations: The front portion has a slightly projecting foundation built of buff-colored pressed brick, while the foundations elsewhere are projecting and built of common quality red brick.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color:
 - a. Front portion: A wide finished-stone water-table separates the basement from the first floor on the front and south side. The walls of the first floor of these two sides are of buff-colored pressed brick laid in a manner to resemble eight long rows of rustication without any vertical divisions. A row of recessed brick between each six rows of brick produces the shadowed deep joint to give the effect of rustication.

Separating the first and upper stories is a finished-stone belt course. Walls of the upper three floors of the front and south walls are of red brick laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers. Quoins are of buff colored pressed brick. A wide three-part entablature, complete with modillions and dentils, surrounds the upper south and front sides; this is capped with a brick parapet.

The entire north wall of the front portion is common brick laid in American bond. There is no cornice or parapet.

- b. Middle portion: Walls are of common brick laid in American bond. The middle section has a plain brick belt course between the first and second floors; this continues the stone belt course of the front portion. A simple brick cornice surmounts this part.
- c. Rear portion: Walls are brick laid in common bond. There are brick pilasters between the windows on the south and north sides and a corbelled brick cornice. A brick parapet, with projections to conform to the pilasters, surrounds the top.
4. Structural system: Brick load-bearing walls and steel skeletal construction.
5. Chimneys: The furnace chimney is located at the southwest rear corner of the building, while on the north wall of the front portion is a chimney that serves the fireplace in the "Home Parlor."
6. Openings:
 - a. Entrance doorway: The well-proportioned entrance is located in the center of the 12th Street facade. Nine granite steps lead up to a projecting portico. On either side of the portico is a wide pedestal; on each pedestal are two polished granite Roman Doric columns. The modillioned cornice of the portico forms a continuation of the stone belt. There is a parapet atop the portico.
 - b. Windows: On either side of the entrance on the first floor and on the south side of the front portion are large triple windows, each being arranged with a large two-pane double-hung center window and narrow side windows. Corresponding transom windows are above each unit and wood panels below.

Windows on the upper three floors of the front portion are all two-pane double hung sash. Window heights are successively graduated in the upper three floors. All of the windows on the top three floors of the front portion have stone stills, while those on the second and third floors have stone keystones set in flat-arch splayed brick lintels.

Windows in other portions of the building are double-hung one-over-one-light sashes with the exception of the large gymnasium windows which have 24 panes, and the basement windows of the rear portion which have six panes. There is one triple window, that resembles those on the front portion, on the south side of the center portion of the building. All windows in the middle and rear portions have segmentally arched lintels.

7. Roof: Each of the three sections of the building has a flat roof.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. Basement: The basement is reached from the outside by means of a front entrance located to the left of the building's main entrance, as well as via interior stairs located near the center of the building, and stairs at the rear of the middle portion.

Some of the original basement spaces have been much altered. The bowling alley that extended along much of the south side has been divided into two rooms. A "Log Cabin Room," the decor apparently dating from the 1930s, with false brick fireplace with arched stone opening, is located in the northeast corner. A long central passageway leads to the rear portion of the building where the locker and shower facilities and the boiler room are located. From this rear portion there is access to the swimming pool. The concrete-sided pool-- unused for many years -- runs east and west in the north half of the center portion of the building. The pool, which is located in a room with a low ceiling, originally received natural light by means of sky lights on the north side (the outlines of which are still visible on the ceiling).

- b. First floor: An entrance vestibule, 8' by 9', with three steps, leads into a large lobby. To the right, on the north, is a large social room, 21' by 36', that was originally known as the "Home Parlor." This room originally opened fully onto the lobby, but a modern partition separates them. To the left of the lobby are two rooms which probably originally matched the open arrangement and size of the "Home Parlor," and which originally may have been the reading room and/or billiard room.

Opening into the north side of the lobby is an open-well three run stairway that provides access to the basement and all upper floors. Across from the stairway, on the left hand side of the lobby, is the clerk's desk, a replacement of the original.

Through the middle of the first floor is an eight foot wide corridor. To the right of it is the kitchen and dining room. Because of the inconvenience of the kitchen to the outside exit (across the corridor), the dining room and kitchen may not have been a part of the original design. The Bee of Aug. 10, 1918. mentioned that new YMCA cafeteria "will be ready soon." Apparently there was originally a pantry between the two rooms.

To the left of the center corridor are four offices and a stair hall, all of which apparently conform to the original plan.

At the rear of the corridor, double doors lead into the 42' by 61' gymnasium with 29' ceiling. Completely surrounding the gymnasium are two flat balconies, the upper one narrower than the lower.

First floor ceilings, excepting the gymnasium, are thirteen feet high.

- c. Second floor: The second floor generally follows the layout of the first floor. The front portion is divided into five rooms, three of them facing the street. A meeting room, 52' -10" by 25' -4", corresponds to the area of the dining room/kitchen and center corridor of the first floor. Judging by the arrangement of doors in this room, it may originally have been divided into more rooms. Running east and west is an off-center corridor. To the south of this corridor is a series of sleeping rooms. At the end of the corridor are short flights of steps leading upward and downward to the two gymnasium balconies.
- d. Third and fourth floors: These two floors are identical. Each floor has twenty-three sleeping rooms, eighteen of which are along both sides of a long eight foot wide corridor running east and west. The remaining six rooms face Twelfth Street and open onto a dog-legged cross hall that is four feet wide. Typical rooms are 8'-6" by 19', 9'-6" by 21', and 7'-6" by 21' (including large closet space in each room). Ceilings on both floors are nine feet high.

At the south end of the cross-hall and the west end of the main corridor are fire escapes. On each floor also is a room with bathing and toilet facilities, storage room, and linen closet.

- 2. Stairways: The principal stairway in the lobby is an open-well three-run stairway that provides access to each floor. The square newel-posts, handrail, square balusters and jigsaw riser brackets were natural oak, but are now painted. The first run of the stair-

way to the second floor is 4'-11" wide; however, the bottom step, rounded on both ends, is 8' wide.

A stair hall that opens onto the south side of the first floor center corridor has two stairways: one flight goes directly down to a door opening onto the alley, and the other stairway leads down to the basement and up to the second floor.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: The public rooms and areas all have a four-foot high wainscoting made of 2-3/4" wide tongue-and-groove boards. This wainscoting was originally varnished, but is now painted. The upper portion of the walls and the ceiling of these public rooms and areas were plastered over wooden lath. These rooms also had a wide, simple oak cornice. Oak pilasters, now painted, framed the wide openings of the rooms that opened off the central lobby. The pilasters were surmounted by wood beams that continued the design of the cornice. In the "Home Parlor" is a working fireplace that has a simple oak mantel--still with its original finish--with a shelf supported by pilasters.

In the remainder of the first floor rooms was a simple board chair-rail, 34½" high. The hallway walls of the second, third and fourth floors were covered to a height of 4'-10" with either burlap or oil cloth, painted. The walls of all other rooms on the top floors are plastered.

The gymnasium walls are brick, now painted.

4. Flooring: Although all of the floors are now covered with linoleum, hardwood floors are visible in a few places.
 5. Openings: Interior doors are usually a standard five horizontal panel design. Some doors opening into offices or public rooms have a glass panel above three horizontal panels. Door frame molding throughout is a simple board design.
 6. Decorative features: Above the "Home Parlor" fireplace is a mural painted by Howard Mackey. The mural is painted on canvas, and has a YMCA theme and symbolism. Mackey, born in Philadelphia in 1898 and a graduate of the architecture program at the University of Pennsylvania, painted the mural about 1930. Mackey taught architecture at Howard University for many years, becoming the first Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning. He retired in 1972.
 7. Mechanical Equipment: A dumb-waiter, providing service to the second-floor meeting room, is located in the northeast corner of first-floor dining room.
- D. General setting and orientation: The building is located in the middle of the west side of the block and faces due east. A decorative iron fence encloses the small front yard. The south and west sides are

bordered by alleys, and a vacant lot adjoins the north side. This was once a charming and well-kept neighborhood. At the time of the dedication of the Y, it was a center of Washington's middle-class black population. The area has undergone considerable decay, but restoration of a few houses is underway.

Prepared by Dr. Harrison M. Ethridge
Associate Professor of History
Catonsville Community College
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer 1979